

State of
Washington
House of
Representatives



February 16, 2001

Dear Friends and Neighbors:

Like many of you, I rely on the state's ferry system as a vital link between our local communities and the rest of the state. Efficient and affordable service is vital to our economic future and the well-being of our families. Today as never before, the system is at risk. In my mind, this is the most critical issue we face, in Kitsap, and here, in Olympia.

I know you have heard about the funding problems. But it's not always easy to get a clear picture of this complex issue. Sometimes you are told about a piece of the overall puzzle, or a suggested fix that is not, in fact, a solution. That's why I'm writing to you, now. You are entitled to know the full extent of the problem, as well as some of the ideas we are putting forward to help matters and ensure dependable service in the months ahead.

By the way, when I say "we," that's exactly what I mean. Our West Sound legislators, House and Senate, are at our best when we work as a team on an issue of this scope. We need to design a strategy that can be sold to the rest of the Legislature as well as the Governor. In simplest terms, we face a funding shortfall of a quarter of a billion dollars (\$250 million) in operating and capital funds for the '01-'03 biennium – simply to keep current service levels intact! Even in Olympia, that's not "budget dust." It's a major investment, and making the case for this requires our best, combined efforts. Not a simple task when we already face a revenue shortage for our statewide transportation needs that is calculated in the billions of dollars over the next decade.

I want to assure you I won't suggest phony fixes that ignore the reality and lose credibility for our efforts with the rest of the legislators. They have their own painful challenges this session. I don't believe we can shift to them or their constituents all the responsibility for solving the financial and other challenges of the ferry system. It's our duty to lead the way through this. I hope you will support us as we make this effort.

None of us has the complete answer, yet, but I am fighting for:

- greater accountability and more efficiencies and savings;
- affordable fares; and
- real, long-term funding solutions.

Passenger tolls appear likely to go up significantly. We don't welcome this, but we know increases are a part of the overall equation. The Tariff Policy Committee (TPC) believes it can count on riders to accept a set of increases around the system that will produce \$30 million in new revenues over the next two years. \$15 million a year translates into hefty increases throughout the system. We are committed to finding ways to drive down the rate and slow the speed of the increases. But we know that every dollar not gained from fares remains part of an enormous shortfall, and makes it tougher to convince the rest of the Legislature on the need to "rescue" the system or its riders.

Personally, I'm convinced the proposed tariff hikes for passenger-only service are too high, too fast, and could lead to the early end of this service. That would be a big mistake. To the contrary, we need to keep it affordable. Passenger-only service clearly benefits our state: It promotes a stronger economy for western

(continued on back)

Washington, and avoids congestion by getting riders out of their cars and to their jobs, quickly. In fact, I view it as a promising form of transit for the future. That is why I have introduced HB 1701, along with my West Sound colleagues — to put these ideas into law. Most of us local legislators feel that a maximum fare for passenger-only service should be set no higher than \$4.75, not the \$6.30 a commuter would pay if the Transportation Commission accepted the initial proposals of the TPC. It is the Commission, by the way, which sets the fares. I am urging it to consider the special role and value of passenger-only service before it acts.

(The TPC is currently holding a series of public meetings in ferry communities to hear testimony concerning the ferry-fare structure. These meetings began earlier this month, and at least two more will take place in the 23rd legislative district after you receive this letter, with a final public hearing in Seattle at the end of March. Details are printed below, and I urge everyone with a stake in this vital issue to attend if at all possible.)

Another source of funding, one I hope we can make permanent, is actually a subsidy from the State General Fund. My Kitsap colleagues and I fought hard last year for a transfer of \$20 million to support ferry operations, to reduce service cutbacks. Without this subsidy, fares would go even higher or service would be cut . . . neither of which we can afford.

Finally, we need to find a stable source of dollars to meet our system's capital needs (around \$200 million) as well as unfunded operating costs. At this early stage, I'm looking at the state highway fund as a possible source. That will put us in direct competition with all the other highway projects in the state, and you'd be correct in concluding this will be a big challenge!

Please don't hesitate to let me know your ideas at any time. The volume of e-mail and phone calls makes it hard at times to respond as quickly as I would like, but I do read your messages, and I appreciate your thoughts. Thank you for making the effort to keep me informed. Your views matter to me.

Sincerely,



Phil Rockefeller
State Representative
23rd District

P.S. I hope to see many of you here in Olympia on Ferry Day, Thursday, February 22. We organized the inaugural edition of this rally last year, when we were feeling the first blows of this funding crisis. I hope that one day soon we will achieve long-term success, and Ferry Day will no longer be necessary. For now, however, I invite everyone who cares about safe, fast and affordable ferries to join us.

TPC Meetings

Kingston

Thu., Feb. 22

5 - 8 p.m.

Kingston Cove Yacht Club
25915 Washington Blvd.

Bainbridge Island

Wed., Feb. 28

4 - 7 p.m.

Bainbridge Island Ferry Terminal

Public Hearing

Seattle

Wed., Mar. 28

8 a.m. - 12 noon

King County Courthouse
4th Floor
516 3rd Ave.